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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 006014

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: USG STATEMENTS ON POLITICAL PRISONERS OVERSHADOWED BY AFTERMATH OF BASHAR,S SPEECH

REF: A. DAMASCUS 05933

[¶](#)B. DAMASCUS 05934

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

[¶](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Civil-society activists, especially those focusing on human rights, have expressed satisfaction with recent USG statements calling for the release of Kamal Labwani and other political prisoners. While glad that the U.S. now includes human rights on its Syria agenda, many contacts feel that such signals are long overdue, too focused on Labwani as an individual, and are exploiting the Mehlis-induced political climate. However, the statements' impact on the general population appears limited, as most of Syrian society is preoccupied by struggles to make ends meet and, in many cases, very supportive of President Asad's November 10 speech. Meanwhile, European diplomats are not pushing their own governments to make public statements on Labwani's behalf, citing the current political climate. END SUMMARY.

[¶](#)2. (C) Discussions with a number of civil-society contacts reveal satisfaction with USG statements over the last week calling for the SARG to release political prisoners, including opposition figure Kamal Labwani and the six remaining Damascus Spring detainees. Anwar al-Bunni noted to Poloff that Syrian civil society had long desired such public statements as evidence that the USG cared about SARG domestic policies in addition to its foreign policy. Joumana Riad Seif, daughter of Damascus Spring detainee Riad Seif, was pleased that public pressure on the regime had increased and hopes that European countries will follow the US's lead. As noted in Ref A, a number of contacts feel that USG pressure forced the SARG to reduce the criminal charges against Labwani from those initially planned.

[¶](#)3. (C) One contact, Haithem Maleh, felt that USG statements were insufficient, noting that there should have been a general call for the SARG to discontinue torture and to release all political prisoners. Civil society activists also fear that USG efforts took place simply on behalf of Labwani himself based on his connections with Washington and that further action is not to be expected. One skeptical contact lumped Labwani and Farid Ghadry's ambitions together, derisively referring to the two oppositionists as the "two princes of Syria." Attorney Salahideen al-Khatib told Polchief that while the USG statements were certainly welcome, the timing could not have been worse, given the current internal tensions and external crises induced by the Mehlis investigation. The bad timing had undercut much of the impact of the statements. Civil-society activist Hassan Abbas, an Alawite intellectual, offered a broad dismissal of the statements, saying Syrians generally considered USG declarations on democracy as code language for re-ordering the Middle East. He noted that press reports on Abu Ghraib and secret U.S. prisons overseas had undercut-- at least temporarily-- the USG's moral authority on the human rights issue.

[¶](#)4. (C) In addition to Mehlis-related developments, USG statements on Labwani have been also largely overshadowed by President Bashar al-Asad's November 10 speech (ref B) among both civil society and the population at large. Multiple civil-society contacts have noted that fear has grown among the opposition community following Asad's threatening remarks, promising to "deal firmly with unpatriotic" people with connections to the outside. In the days immediately following the speech, Bunni took additional personal security steps, including moving his car and keeping his children indoors. Women's-rights activist Daad Mousa told Poloff that she has been told by a friend with connections to the SARG that authorities are demanding that civil-society figures stop giving interviews to the foreign press and meeting with diplomats. Mousa was also told that the SARG would increase surveillance of activists and diplomats alike. Nonetheless, many civil-society activists have ignored the threats and continued business as usual, attending meetings with Poloffs and make provocative statements in public fora, including at a women's conference earlier this week (septel).

[¶](#)5. (C) Due in part to the current political environment following Bashar's speech, other Western embassies in

Damascus are not willing to take a public stance on Labwani's behalf and will not recommend such action to their respective ministries. During a Canadian-hosted luncheon of 18 North American and European mission human rights officers on November 16, much discussion took place regarding how to handle the Labwani case. While not directly criticizing recent USG statements, a German diplomat stated that given the current political situation, now is not the appropriate time for taking public action. She also noted that because Labwani had held political meetings with European and U.S. officials, his was not a "purely" human rights case. A Swedish diplomat noted that any public statements must address political prisoners in general and not just high-profile individuals. While acknowledging that human rights activists had long been calling for foreign governments to make public comments on the Syrian human rights situation, an Austrian diplomat concurred with her EU colleagues that public statements at this moment would be ill-advised. A representative from the European Commission noted that he expects a European Parliament resolution (sponsored by the EP Liberal Democratic wing, which met with Labwani in October) calling for Labwani's release. However, the EC does not plan to do anything on a local level.

16. (C) COMMENT: Asad's emotional November 10 appeal to Syrians' patriotic and religious sentiments made a huge impact on public opinion, both on the street and among the elite. While many contacts acknowledge that the speech was "rough" in places, especially the language on Lebanon, by and large it elicited a positive, emotional Syrian response. One contact reported seeing Syrians burst into tears of emotional agreement with Asad's statement he would only bow his head to Allah. Asad used his moment at the podium to effectively forge the link between the regime and the Syrian people by appealing to Syrians' patriotism and pointing out the threats to Syria's dignity and security. In the wake of the speech, it is very difficult for any activist to raise his or her voice to defend Labwani and his criticism of the SARG. Asad in his speech also effectively played on the doubts many of Labwani's opposition colleagues have had regarding the advisability of his visit to the U.S. at this time and of publicly criticizing the regime during the visit. So far Labwani's defenders, except for his family and other Damascus Spring family members, are maintaining this carefully circumscribed defense, insisting merely that his imprisonment is a human-rights violation, but unwilling to make him a cause celebre.

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